
IS IT OKAY TO SAY »INDIAN?«

4/2024



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Is it okay to say »Indian?« We would like to explore this frequently asked question here, but there is no simple answer.

One word can make all the difference. For those who are affected, some terms represent power relations and external determination. Other terms represent self-determination, recognition, and new perspectives. For those of us who merely apply the terms without being affected, they reflect our attitude and willingness to engage with often complex issues.

Language not only depicts reality, it can also create reality, just as specific terms can point the way – from provocation and indifference to respect and willingness to engage in dialogue. »Political correctness,« which is so often frowned upon, can do more than just being politically correct.

Cover (photo: Tom Dachs):

Producer unknown to us

Replica canvas for a small tipi

Europe, Germany, Leipzig

c. 2000

Canvas, sewn, painted

Donated to the museum by »IG Mandanindianer Taucha«

2000–2008

For this newspaper, we used a handout from the North American Native Museum (NONAM) in Zurich as an inspiration, and developed it further. Thank you for your suggestions!

A TERM THAT PACKS A PUNCH

The German term »Indianer« (Indian) is generalizing, it reproduces stereotypes, and it is historically inaccurate. Nevertheless, in certain situations, it can be necessary or useful. For example, when we need to clarify immediately which region is being referred to. This is often not the case with politically correct terms from the English-speaking world, such as First Nations or Native Americans. The same holds true for terms that also refer to other communities, such as Aboriginals, Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous Cultures, and others.

Today, the German terms »Indianer« and »Indianerin« are considered less problematic than the term »Indian(s)« in North America. In German-speaking countries, they even have an almost universally positive connotation; in the German perception of »cowboys and Indians,« »Indians« are usually seen as »the good guys.« In Canada and the US, the term is considered politically incorrect, offensive, and derogatory. In some cases, however, members of Indigenous groups in North America ironically refer to themselves as »Indians,« comparable to the use of the N-word in North American Black pop culture.

But does that mean that the term »Indianer« or »Indianerin« is unproblematic in German, or is it simply problematic in a different way than the English term »Indian,« because it has positive connotations? What is certain is that it is associated with generalizations, stereotypical images, and expectations.

GENERALIZATION AND STEREOTYPE

The Indigenous peoples of the Americas initially did not have a universal group designation for themselves; the names of their communities often simply meant »the people.« However, it was the first Europeans to come to the Americas who developed a group designation to describe the people they encountered. »Indian,« therefore, is as generalizing as »European.« Most German-speaking people who hear the word »Indianer« automatically think of the prairies, or Great Plains. However, the Plains nations, who have lived in the region since the 18th century, make up only a small portion of the Indigenous communities in Canada and the United States. In 2023, the United States listed 574 Indigenous nations as recognized by the federal government. In Canada, approximately 630 communities represent more than 50 Indigenous nations. This goes to show that this term covers an enormous cultural diversity.

When it comes to Plains cultures, the stereotypical image of »Indians« that developed around the mid-19th century is not far behind. Notions of tipis, feathered warbonnets, and tomahawks, of »noble savages,« that is, brave, honest, and selfless warriors living a spiritual life in harmony with nature – many Indigenous people today criticize these stereotypes as one-dimensional, reductive, and stuck in the past. They have but little to do with the reality of these cultures.

HISTORICAL ERROR

In 1492, in search of a sea route to India, Christopher Columbus landed in the Bahamas, and later reached Central and South America. He never made it to North America. He called the inhabitants »Indios,« which became »Indian« in English, and »Indianer« or »Indianerin« in German. Until the end of his life, he believed that he had reached Asia. In many languages, however, the term »Indio« was simply used by Europeans to refer to any people who lived »overseas.«

Nevertheless, Columbus went down in history as the »Discoverer of America.« Vikings had already reached Newfoundland and settled Greenland around the year 1000, some 500 years before Columbus. Yet, for a long time, their stories remained unknown in Europe. Moreover, the Americas had already been inhabited for several thousand years. For the Indigenous population, the matter is clear: Their ancestors had always lived there.

PAINFUL MEMORY

For the First Nations, Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Inuit, Columbus is anything but a hero. They certainly do not consider him an explorer, and his term »Indian« is an unwelcome reminder of the colonization of the continent. In their eyes, it is primarily their shared history of oppression, exploitation, displacement, and discrimination that justifies an umbrella term like »Indians.«

ARE THERE ANY ALTERNATIVES?

First and foremost: THE perfect alternative does not exist. There are a number of terms that have been developed in different countries and contexts that were later discarded and reworked for a variety of reasons. So far, no term has been found that is both sufficiently inclusive and specific to work for all affected parties and situations. This process may never be concluded. Some common terms include First Nations (Canada), Native Americans (USA), Indigenous Peoples (UN, international), and many Indigenous self-designations. All of these terms have one thing in common: They are not self-explanatory in German-speaking countries, and they do not work seamlessly.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

In the early 20th century, people in the United States began to speak of »American Indians« to better distinguish between Indigenous Americans and Southeast Asian Indians. Beginning in the 1950s, the term »Native Americans« became widely accepted, and replaced the term »Indians.« In the 1970s, the Red-Power civil rights movement went international and used the term »Indigenous Peoples,« which included Latino migrants with Indigenous roots. However, »Native Americans« did and still does also refer to non-Indigenous people who were born in the United States, simply referring to people who are not migrants. To this day, all three terms – Native Americans, Indigenous Peoples, and American Indians – are found in everyday usage and among institutions (e.g., National Council of American Indians, Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, etc.). Even »Indian« (or the slang version NDN) is still used as a self-designation.

WHAT ELSE MIGHT WORK?

Indigenous nations and communities exist throughout the world. Terms such as »Indigenous Peoples,« »Primitive Peoples,« or »Natives« are often associated with primitive ways of life. Although indigenous means »born into a land« or »native,« the term is now internationally accepted and used, especially within the UN. There are about 5,000 Indigenous Nations and about 450 million people with Indigenous roots worldwide today.

»INDIANS« AND THEIR »TRIBES« IN CONTEXT

The term »Indian« continues to be loaded with stereotypical images. For this reason, historian Robert Berkhofer suggested in 1979 that the term »Indian« be used in English to refer to the stereotype, concept, or image, and »Native Americans« when referring to specific persons. This distinction between image and people also makes sense in German. German children generally play »Indianer,« not »White Earth Nation of Minnesota.«

The term will remain relevant in the legal context as well. Historical legal texts and court decisions will retain their titles. For example, descendants of the people who were registered under the Canadian »Indian Act« of 1876 have specific rights today that are, however, not granted to Canadian Inuit or Métis. Many communities still carry »Indian« in their official group titles, such as the »San Manuel Band of Mission Indians.«

Europeans have often used the term »tribe« to denote primitiveness, arguing that a tribal society cannot establish a state. As a result, many Indigenous communities have come to refer to themselves as »nations.« However, the idea of »nations« is a European concept and carries problematic memories, both in English and German. Some communities adopted the term »nation« for their official title (e.g., Navajo Nation, Cherokee Nation), while others are still officially called »tribe« (e.g., Apache Tribe of Oklahoma). The Cherokee call themselves a nation, but their official governing body is called the »Tribal Council.«

Moreover, »tribe« (from Latin: tribus), in its scientific sense, denotes a social and political unit whose cohesion is based on kinship relationships. This neutral classification is still needed in the professional context to distinguish tribal societies from other social or political forms of organization.

KNOWING – AND WANTING TO KNOW – WHAT WE ARE TALKING ABOUT

Which terms you use is up to you. What is important is to be aware of what they (can) mean, regardless of the language. If you talk about »Indians« in Canada or the United States without being part of an Indigenous community, you may be hurting people and may face backlash.

No matter which term you choose and whoever you discuss it with: Treat each other with respect! There could be many reasons for using or not using one term or another.

When talking to Indigenous people, simply ask them what they prefer to call themselves. Their answer may be quite different from the next person, though.

If you want to learn more about this topic,
here are some resources:

- <https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/terminology>
- Michael Yellow Bird: What We Want to Be Called (1999), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1185964>
- Chelsea Vowel, *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Issues in Canada* (2016)
- You could also type »Indigenous Terminology« into Google, and get translations at www.deepl.com or another translation software if you need them.

By the way:

Terms and their uses are subject to constant change. We regularly update this brochure, but make no claim to its completeness. It is merely intended as an introduction to a complex subject. Therefore: Stay informed!

Do you know of any terms that are missing and that should definitely be mentioned? Let us know, we welcome your suggestions!

Contact:

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WHERE DO THEY SAY WHAT?

Canada

- First Nations: The accepted alternative term for »Indians.« However, it denotes a clearly defined group that does not include other communities recognized as »Indigenous,« such as the Métis or Inuit.
- Inuit: Since 1980, the Inuit Circumpolar Council has officially used the term »Inuit« instead of »Eskimo.« In Alaska, however, the term »Eskimo« is still used as an Indigenous self-designation.
- Métis/métis: Capitalization is a political issue in this context. The Métis emerged from the relationships between French hunters and Indigenous women at the time of the Red and Assiniboine River fur trade. They have been recognized as an Indigenous culture since 1982. The métis, descendants of Euro-Indigenous relationships not related to the Métis community, are also fighting for the same recognition.
- Indigenous Peoples/Nations/person/individual etc. (adj.) Indigenous is capitalized in English, as are Peoples or Nations when they follow Indigenous. Because the term is used in Canada as a collective term for all First Nations, Inuit and Métis, and because of its generalizing nature, it is not always well received.
- Terms such as »Aboriginal(s)« and »Native(s)« used to be common in Canada but are now considered outdated and, for many, even a no-go.

United States

- Native Americans: used as a substitute term for »Indians« (does not include Inuit or Indigenous inhabitants of the U.S. Pacific Islands)
- American Indians: introduced to distinguish from people from East India
- First Americans: a more recent alternative to »Indians,« but also to »Native Americans«
- Native Alaskans or Alaska Natives: for Indigenous communities other than Inuit
- Native Nations/Peoples/persons
- Indigenous Nations/Peoples/persons
- Inuit
- Eskimo: still used as a self-designation by some groups in Alaska

International

- Indigenous Peoples: This term is commonly used throughout the world. After negotiations at the UN (starting in 1975), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was issued in 2007
- Indigenous Nations/Cultures/Communities/People
- Autochthonous nations/cultures/communities/people